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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH RUSSIAN DFM KARASIN,
JANUARY 31

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) Summary: Ambassador Burns met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin January 31 to discuss recent developments on regional issues. They spent most of the meeting discussing Georgia; it was clear that President Saakashvili's accusations concerning the January 22 pipeline explosion have irritated the Russians beyond their usual hostility towards their neighbor. That irritation underlay hard-line statements from Karasin about the Russian response, if Georgia were to demand the withdrawal of Russia's peacekeepers from South Ossetia. Karasin was no more charitable in his exposition of Russian thinking on Abkhazia, with demands to jettison or heavily modify the Boden paper. Karasin was far more positive on Nagorno-Karabakh (he had just returned from Armenia and Azerbaijan) and Ukraine (which he will visit in two weeks); he was upbeat about Black Sea Fleet and gas negotiations. On Iran, he lauded the course of action the P-5 chose in London as a "good compromise." Karasin was cautious in reply to Ambassador's push on elections in Belarus. End summary.

P Consultations, Karabakh

12. (C) Ambassador confirmed for Karasin that Under Secretary Burns would participate in the G8 Political Directors' meetings in Moscow February 21. Karasin said he would confer with DFM Kislyak about setting aside time for regional consultations. Karasin thought this would allow for a timely exchange of views on elections in Ukraine and Belarus. Ambassador stressed that we should look at areas, especially in Russia's neighborhood, in which we could cooperate to make progress -- Nagorno-Karabakh being one possibility. Karasin said he had come away from his recent trip to Azerbaijan and Armenia convinced that there was a window of opportunity for constructive resolution of the conflict, though no guarantee it could be achieved. At least the parties understood that after 2006 there would be no progress for a long time. The atmosphere was on the whole "acceptable." The international community must get the sides to stop playing political games and get down to real work. Karasin said he and U/S Burns would be able to discuss this in light of the February 11-12 meeting between Kocharyan and Aliyev in Paris.

Georgia: Thaw or Freeze?

13. (C) Karasin said he wanted to discuss Georgia. Just a few minutes previously, President Putin had been asked at his press conference (septel) whether there would be a thaw in relations with Georgia. Putin had said Russia was ready for such a step. But the Georgian political leadership -- not the Georgian people, with whom there has been no problem -- must stay on the path of civilized interaction and avoid hysteria. The explosions of January 22 must be investigated.

But "Georgia's partners" (i.e., the U.S. and Europe) need to tamp down the "hysteria" on the Georgian side. Karasin cited the January 27 cutoff of gas to the Russian embassy in Tbilisi, "even while Gazprom's technicians were working under terrible conditions to repair the gas line." Karasin said 4th CIS Department Director Andrey Kelin (who attended the meeting) would be heading to Tbilisi next week to try to smooth relations.

14. (C) Ambassador Burns welcomed that step. He said the U.S. has been clear with Georgia on the need for restraint in public statements. We are pleased that gas is being restored to Georgia thanks to the repair crews. Transparency -- the presence of a Georgian expert to observe the repair work -- would have helped restrain some of the impulses that led to the less public statements that the GOR found so objectionable.

South Ossetia -----

15. (C) Karasin presented a demarche on South Ossetia. The situation in the zone of conflict was disturbing, and the unyielding position of the Georgians had not been understood by the South Ossetian side. The net result was that the Joint Control Commission had not met, and we are approaching the February 10 deadline set by the Georgian Parliament to discuss the situation, including the disposition of the Russian peacekeeping forces. Given the atmosphere, Karasin said, the Parliament was likely to react emotionally. It would be important that the Georgian Government and President avoid "dramatic" action. Most residents of South Ossetia are Russian citizens, and Russia would take the appropriate decisions to "defend stability." Russia's choice would be predictable: not to abandon its people. It was important

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not to get into a dead-end situation.

16. (C) The Ambassador replied that we would continue to encourage careful thinking on all sides. It would be important for Russia to find a formula -- perhaps by ensuring that a JCC meeting take place -- that offered the Georgian Parliament some prospect of progress and practical steps. Russia needs to do all it can to help calm the situation, too.

17. (C) In a separate conversation earlier in the day, MFA Georgia Office Director Grigoryev told us Russia sees several decision points: a) what action the Parliament demanded on the basis of the report, which PM Noghaidei had already informed the Russians would be negative; b) what the Georgian government decided to do with the Parliament's recommendations; and c) what President Saakashvili decided on the basis of the Government's recommendations. Grigoryev hinted -- ever so slightly -- that there was room for compromise on the structure of the JCC, but he was clear, like Karasin, that a demand for withdrawal of the Russian peacekeepers would "cross a red line."

Abkhazia -----

18. (C) Karasin regretted that Russia's approach on Abkhazia in the UNSC had not met with understanding. The Boden paper was weak and had not been working. Since its submission there had been developments elsewhere, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Serbia-Montenegro with regard to Kosovo. We could not ignore those developments. Predictably, Karasin said, some accuse Russia of supporting separatism. But Russia wanted to persuade Abkhazia to be more constructive and flexible. For example, it should allow the opening of an OSCE Human Rights office and think about teaching Georgian in the schools of Gali district. These would be facts on the ground that could make a difference.

19. (C) The Ambassador responded that Russia's position at

the UN had led to serious questions about how to interpret Russia's current thinking on Georgia's territorial integrity.

Karasin responded that "all questions" on that score would be answered at the February 2-3 meeting of the Friends Group in Geneva. The Ambassador repeated his question on territorial integrity, and Karasin answered that there was no change in Russia's position; rather, to go forward we had to look at the situation as it was on the ground, not on the basis of "old stereotypes." Modifications were needed in the Boden paper, and in its structure. (Note: Grigoryev told us earlier in the day that the Russians had agreed to the request of Abkhaz "PM" Bagapsh to work towards a negotiating structure that did not start off by recognizing Abkhazia as a part of Georgia.)

Ukraine

¶10. (C) The Ambassador asked Karasin about developments with Ukraine, and about Karasin's upcoming trip there. Karasin said he would lead the Russian side when the Black Sea Fleet Sub-Commission met on February 14. Russia would press for the confirmation of old agreements that allowed for the normal functioning of the fleet and the comfort of its personnel. The Ukrainian side needed to be satisfied on financial issues. The problem was multi-faceted, but Karasin was optimistic. He hoped it would cease to be an irritant in relations in the run-up to the Ukrainian election. After his visit, there were no high-level contacts planned before the election.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked about gas negotiations with the Ukrainians, noting that we continued to hear rumors of another cut-off. Karasin answered that negotiations are proceeding, and the negotiators are down to concrete numbers.

There are experienced negotiators on both sides. Karasin assured the Ambassador that there would be no gas cut-off -- provided, he qualified, that there were no "unilateral provocations" from the Ukrainian side. "This is the course our President has chosen," he stated.

Belarus

¶12. (C) The Ambassador raised the elections in Belarus, noting that Assistant Secretary Fried has yet to receive a visa. Karasin said the Russians had been active on the elections, and believed that Lukashenko would let the opposition speak out. But we needed to look at the context: we should evaluate elections in Belarus as we did those in the Middle East, by considering the region and the history. We should not make a fetish out of elections, or see them as

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a cure for all ills.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador welcomed steps to invite international observers to the elections. But the elections themselves had to be conducted fairly. Only then would the observers call them fair. This would make a difference to us and to Europe -- and to the people of Belarus. He hoped the Russians would use their influence with Lukashenko to ensure free and fair elections. Karasin replied that the observers themselves had to be honest and unprejudiced. The Ambassador asked about progress toward a Union Treaty with Belarus. Karasin said work was progressing slowly.

Iran, Afghanistan

¶14. (C) Karasin lauded the compromise reached on referring Iran to the UNSC. The Ambassador agreed it was positive. Secretary Rice and the EU-3 had listened carefully to what

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the Russians had said on tactics. The result was a strong

signal to Iran, and the Ambassador hoped Iran would use the next few weeks to make a U-turn in its policies. Karasin cautioned that the Iranians had already had months to think through their position, and informing the UNSC does not yet mean UNSC consideration of the issue. But the Russians saw the step as useful, and so did the Chinese.

¶15. (C) The Ambassador responded that the firmness of the Russian position was critical to getting Iran's attention. Iran could not be permitted to play games with the definition of uranium enrichment. Communication among Russia, the U.S. and the EU-3 had been excellent thus far on this issue. It showed an ability to work together. Similarly, it had not been easy for Putin to forgive Afghanistan's USD 10 billion sovereign debt; this was a good step. Karasin welcomed these "areas of cooperation."

Comment

¶16. (C) The Russians are every bit as emotional on Georgia as they accuse the Georgians of being, and Saakashvili's accusations do not help the Russians think rationally as they approach the parliamentary debate in Georgia on peacekeepers in Ossetia, and the choices to be faced after that. The childish tit-for-tat cutoffs of gas and electricity to the Georgian and Russian embassies in each other's capitals show that emotions could make this molehill into a mountain. The slight hint on revising the JCC could be real -- or it could be one official's wishful thinking. We did not get the impression that Kelin would be taking specific proposals with him to Tbilisi (the Russians are still too angry); it might be helpful if he could come back with concrete, well-elaborated proposals from the Georgian government about what it would need to guarantee a soft landing on the PKO dispute.
BURNS